

To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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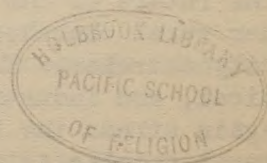
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The Rural Church and Its Message to Free India

By Premchand G. Bhagat*



We rejoice that after sixty-two years of persistent, but peaceful, struggle India has now become independent. August 17, 1947, brought us both the rights of self-government and the responsibilities for working out solutions to our complex social and economic situations. In general our national leaders are aware of this new and sobering duty which has so recently come to them. Within the limits of their abilities I believe it is their desire to lead the people toward real freedom, without distinction as to caste, color, or creed. We are profoundly indebted to the Constituent Assembly for its careful consideration of the major topic of fundamental rights.

To us the most essential and significant clause in the new Constitution is that "every individual shall have the right to freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practice, and propagate his religion." This recognizes the basic concept of equal rights for all religions in the country.

We are now in the midst of a new and rapidly-changing India. As Christians we enter this era with high hope for our country and our people. It is essential that we re-examine all of our Christian enterprises in the light of our new opportunities and the changed environment. What is the message of the Church to India at this critical time? This is the topic I would like to consider briefly with you.

Since the Christian faith is more deeply rooted in rural areas, it is quite fitting to confine ourselves to the subject, "The Message of the Rural Church to Free India." Freedom is more than a political concept; it must be viewed in its relationship to the poor of our villages, those who have so long been oppressed, neglected, and enslaved by poverty. As churchmen we are directly interested because it is among these people that the Christian message finds the greatest welcome and response.

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THE CHURCH IN INDIA IS ESSENTIALLY A RURAL CHURCH

India is a land of villages; there are over 700,000 of them. Ninety per cent of the people reside in villages. Our cities are populated largely by those who were, or may be still, village people. J. Z. Hodge in his invaluable book, Salute to India, declares, "It is among these thickly-sown villages that the good seed of the Kingdom finds the most fertile soil." The Indian church, therefore, is a rural church, deriving more than two-thirds of its membership from village sources. Stressing the significance of our rural culture and traditions, Mahatma Gandhi said, "The future of India will be decided not by her cities but by her villages." Speaking as a churchman, I think I shall not be in error if I state that the future of the church in India will be decided not by her city churches but by her rural churches. It is the rural church which populates and re-populates the city churches. The villages are the feeders for our educational, theological, medical, and industrial institutions, which are located largely in cities. May I again stress the fact that the Gospel seems to find a more natural rootage among rural peoples as the Good News spreads from neighbor to neighbor and from community to community.

Some of India's more prominent leaders have come to believe that Christians have an important contribution to make in the rebuilding of this land. We dare not fail them. But to leaven the life of so vast a country is an humbling and a challenging task. If God is to use us, his servants, in this way, it is for us to see that the church is strong spiritually, economically, and educationally. In India today a great and effectual door is opened unto us.

THE MESSAGE OF THE RURAL CHURCH

What is the message of the rural church to free India? In brief it is the redeeming message of Christ. We must use every worthy means to mediate that message into our homes, our schools, and our common life, one with another. There must be a living church, a goodly fellowship of believers whose religious, social and economic life has been influenced by the faith they hold.

Let us take one example, that of our manual work. Hard work in the home, in the field, or in the shop is the heritage of village people. Christianity dignifies all honorable efforts to earn a living. There may still be some who look down upon manual labor, but not true Christians. Work may become as a tonic to heal many of our ills. Christians will dignify their faith and honor God through their daily work. At no time did Christ stress with his disciples any idea of more pay and less work. If India is to advance into her rightful place among the free peoples of the world and if we are to realize some of the high goals set before us there must be a more universal concept as to the dignity and the value of work well done. We have the clear teaching of our Master on this point. Surely, "honest toil is holy service; faithful work is praise and prayer," as Van Dyke said.

The above is but one illustration of what the Christian message can do toward redeeming one phase of life. God has trained us during the years for just such tasks, and if we follow his leading, he may through our efforts redeem even larger areas of our country's physical, mental, and spiritual life.

Let us now consider some of the more essential tasks which confront the rural church today:

. To Deepen the Spiritual Life of Her Members

There will be difficult struggles before us, and our way may be the narrow path of the Cross. We must be fully disciplined and prepared for whatever meetings may come. We shall need a refined and a regenerated church. This can be achieved through worship, Bible study, self-dedication, and prayer. Our goal should be a self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating church. This can only be accomplished by deepening the spiritual experiences of the members. Every Christian must become a witness, using whatever talents and opportunities he has to share the love of Christ for all men. He must be ready to minister to his neighbors and share with them the new life he has found.

. To Provide Educated Leadership

Three factors are involved in the providing of a more adequate leadership for the church:

(1) Volunteer lay leadership. Practically every essential phase of our church work could be performed by lay leaders. Worship services, youth meetings, Sunday school classes, health and home activities could all be conducted by lay people, sometimes to the great advantage of the church. The rural church just cannot hope to carry on its enlarged responsibilities by paid leadership alone. Even if it were possible, that would be a poor example to the non-Christian world and not in accord with the spirit of our Lord. If we give to this part of our work the attention that it should have, I believe God will give us volunteer lay leaders who possess a true sense of Christian values -- men and women who will rise above any thought of personal honor or wealth or power and serve their fellow men because selfless love motivates them.

(2) Highly-trained ministers. At this critical time the church needs able men to lead and to guide in its larger program and policies. Considering this need, the National Christian Council stated that "the Council calls attention to the need for a highly-trained ministry in rural areas." We hope that some of our most able and consecrated young people will answer this call and that our colleges and seminaries will so prepare them that they can go out and serve with humility, power, and honor.

(3) Specialists. In addition to church and religious leaders we need those who are specially prepared as rural teachers, health workers, agriculturists, youth leaders, and family life specialists. Some of these might serve directly for the church, and others might be employed to serve under public agencies. To prepare this type of specialized leadership must now become the concern of our colleges and seminaries.

The Christian rural service and training centers can provide such training through courses designed for those who may already be out of school or college. The church in free India will need a diversified leadership, skilled in meeting the day-to-day needs of village people.

. To Recruit Young People for Service in the Church

The church, and especially the rural church, is in great need of young people to qualify themselves for this difficult and responsible work. The church summons the very best, those of full consecration, who can also pass high intellectual and personality tests. We need an increasing number of properly-trained

young people who choose village work as a career, willingly leaving behind any comforts or conveniences of city life.

We must now ask our schools and colleges to rearrange their programs in certain places in order to prepare such people. Our present educational procedure do not prepare young people to deal effectively with village people and their needs. The eyes of nearly all young people are turned toward the cities and the somewhat doubtful opportunities for more ease and better pay there. But may I remind you that most of the work to be done is in the country. The time has arrived for us to reassess our whole system of Christian education with a view to seeing whether or not it is meeting this most essential need in our Christian movement. Why should nearly all of our costly institutions -- high schools, colleges, seminaries, and industrial schools -- be centered in cities, when so large a proportion of the people are in the villages and the basic problems of new India are to such a large extent rural? The recruiting of young people for work in the rural church will suffer and lag behind the need until we face this problem seriously.

4. To Make the Rural Church Literate

Nearly seventy-five per cent of all Christians are still illiterate. While salvation does not depend upon formal education, the ability to read is a great advantage as we work toward a more satisfying life for village people.

5. To Make Our Homes Christian

The home is a constituent unit of the Church, and the spiritual quality of the Church cannot rise above the Christian character of its homes. Some of the marks of a Christian home are family worship, harmonious living together, regular church attendance, and unselfish interest in community affairs.

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In closing may I draw attention to the statement issued by the tenth annual meeting of the National Christian Council which reads, "This Council firmly believes that in a self-governing India the Church will be in a better position to give testimony by its life, service, and teaching to the redeeming power of Christ as Lord in personal, national, and international life." The Council further states that a singular opportunity confronts the Church in India today. To meet this increased opportunity the rural church must grow stronger and stronger spiritually, socially, and economically.

Of plans and programs for a new India there are many. To what extent do these plans represent only the thoughts of man or the design of God? It is the sobering and humbling task of all Christians to help in forming the Kingdom of God in which even "the least of these" can find a more satisfying life and the joy and peace that come through faith in God.

May this be the message of the rural church to free India.

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